



CREDITMAN '04

Time underfoot: Gunter Christmann's recent paintings

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GUNTER CHRISTMANN is 'one of Australian art's better kept secrets'.¹ Art historian Mary Eagle remarked that Christmann is one of the major artists of his generation, those achieving recognition in the mid-to-late 1960s to 1970s, though his work can be less accessible than theirs.² On accessibility, Christmann commented: 'A painting isn't a poster. It doesn't need to say everything at once. It should be slow.' Rather than stymieing interpretation, though, Christmann's observation suggests how to approach his paintings of recent years – and indicates why his work has remained relevant to contemporary interests, though there have been few opportunities to view it in Sydney since the early 1990s. With exhibitions during 2013 and 2014 in both Sydney and Melbourne, Christmann is again in the spotlight.

Christmann's recent paintings condense time: they emblematised his own history of making and his concern with process. Seeing them as process works assists in clarifying his role within the history of Australian art. I suggest that Christmann's work represents both points of attachment to twentieth-century Euro-American modernism, and Australian art's often non-contiguous

relation to it. Christmann is the line that bends as it runs parallel, the thread that pulls from the fabric.

Curators, artists, art writers and collectors remark that Christmann is 'an artist's artist'. His 'sprinkle' paintings of the 1970s, such as the subtle *Oktoberwald*, 1973, received sustained critical attention.³ Christmann began his career showing at Sydney's Central Street Gallery. His paintings were included in the landmark exhibition 'The Field' in 1968, in the first Biennale of Sydney in 1973, and in exhibitions reviewing the legacy of 'The Field' and of Central Street.⁴ Nonetheless, many reviewers of his shows have expressed difficulty with work after the sprinkle paintings that, in the language of 1960s and 1970s painting in Australia, combined landscape and figurative elements with abstract composition, mark-making and spaces. This is a complex task, and Christmann has taken risks. Though his work speaks to earlier modernist painting, it reads as contemporary; though he has since 1979 employed popular-culture references, including images of street refuse, as in *With cola*, 1981, discarded dolls, and his graffiti tag 'Ozkar',⁵ his work has never ironised, nor has it

participated in the conceptual discourse of much Australian work of the 1980s and 1990s onwards.

Christmann's paintings of the last few years, however, are deceptively approachable. They present a simplified vocabulary, one of flattened forms in saturated and pastel colours with vivid linear elements in a shallow space, which references Joan Miró, Paul Klee, Piet Mondrian, Kasimir Malevich ('All of them', Christmann said). These mid-sized works might well be imagined in a domestic interior, Christmann's preferred viewing situation. A transparent white square hovers in *Europa*, 2011, and *Epimetheus*, 2011. An artist's palette drifts across the picture plane like a stylised cloud. The palette is an obvious cliché, a sign already heavily coded; it appears in other works of the same period, such as *Natalia M.*, 2011, with its clear yellows, *Birdsong*, 2010, *Hofmaler*, 2010, and *Backroom boys*, 2011. The palette shape also suggests forms Christmann engineers from coathangers – another humble material literally bent into service. In *Epimetheus*, the coathanger form is both an ambulatory line and an amphora standing for Pandora's 'box' at the work's narrative level, as Christmann's title indicates. This shape, which also seems the outline of an indeterminate southern continent, is echoed by the limned head at the left, which in turn references the same form, with artist's palette, in *Europa*. *Europa* contains other visual clues that beg to be taken literally – the decorative motif at the right as a notation for ancient Greece, and the maple leaves that might be associated with other, colder, places entirely.

The viewer settles on such meanings alone at his or her peril. These works may engage in dialogue with each other (just as the bent coathanger–amphora shape also appears in *C. C. classic*, 2010, where it is coloured black, like an off-the-shoulder evening gown), and certainly they do not refuse an immediate visual pleasure, but they are also keys to their own densely layered history. This group of paintings has had three lives: many first appeared at a 2011

solo show at Society, a twelve-month curatorial project devised by Susan Gibb, then in Christmann's 2012 show at Niagara Galleries in Melbourne, directed by Bill Nuttall. Christmann has since added to or overpainted areas in many of these works for his recent exhibition at The Commercial, Sydney, directed by Amanda Rowell. Overpainting is not just a pragmatics of re-use, but an inscription of process within the works themselves.

Christmann likes painted-on frames, a reference not only to pictorial framing, when his works were based on photographs, but to the 'dry box' and 'float tank', compositional tools he has favoured since 1975. Domestic and urban detritus and cardboard cut-outs are shuffled in a box. The float tank is literally that: an enamelled tray in which objects float in water. These in turn reference horizontality, Christmann's stated 'ground consciousness', and his characteristic inversion of space that moves visual weight from 'bottom' to 'top'.⁶ In *Here*, 1987, Christmann's silhouetted outline is drawn over a building that leans precipitously forward. Similarly, *With cola's* forms are more fully realised at the top, merely sketched at bottom. Christmann used the dry-box method to begin each of the recent works.

The dry box, Christmann said, suggests a paradox of movement through apparent stillness, while objects in the float tank seem to move even after a haze of dust fixes them in place. In *Elma*, 2009, black squares, red rectangles, and a lone red dot float on the surface of a shallow, milky space which is clearly not oriented vertically; the forms slowly tumble, but which way is 'up'? Reading *Elma* through Christmann's clustering of dissolving objects in previous street-detritus works suggests the floating shapes as both abstractions and actualities, their movement a function of surface tension and a containing edge. In their playfully unanticipated relationships and topsy-turvy space, the works also gesture to minimalist sculpture's concern with situatedness and spectatorial perception.





STRING

KRISTIN MAIN '09

STERLING, 2009

Acrylic on canvas, 29 x 29 cm

Courtesy the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

Even in seemingly straightforward works, though, there is a density of references: compare *Amadeo*, 2009, to other works that feature *Elma*'s squares and black lines. Those stubby shapes floating on a pale ground look suspiciously like cigarette butts, one end dark with ash. Serendipitously, a face appears from the most minor notations of line and camel-coloured butts: the elongated nose and pursed mouth of a Modigliani portrait, as 'Amadeo' implies. The title also refers to Christmann's late wife, Jenny, whose dada-influenced sculptures and collages, often featuring disjointed faces and bodies, were frequently the subjects of Christmann's paintings. *En face de Baudelaire*, 1993, and *Filosofa*, 1993, depict Jenny's knitted book works, on which faces are minimally indicated with safety pins.⁷ Jenny is present in so many of Christmann's works: the condensation in his recent paintings, their reduction of complex meaning to sign, points to the self-referentiality Jenny and Gunter enjoyed, the circulation of ideas that became familiar symbols within their private intellectual and artistic dialogue.

While the float tank offers glacially slow movement, the dry box creates moments of related disjunction. Shake the box again, and objects have shifted. Works such as *Goras*, 2009, and *Sterling*, 2009, frame arrangements of rings, T-bones (cable ties), and bars, suggesting both continuous generation of form and its capture. This production of images is also set within time: that of the snapshot, an unending present referencing the past as series.

The recent paintings similarly offer the present as a function of the past: it is simultaneously a distillation of what has come before, and a moment in a changing sequence within an explicitly quotidian matrix of discarded objects and daily encounters. While Christmann feels his central mediums have remained those of painting and drawing, he has ranged across sound, photography and, in the last few years, short videos – all reflecting a common concern with process over time.

Immediately before he began using the float tank and dry box, Christmann began a series of sound works titled 'Audio-Plastik' while in Berlin on an artist-in-residence program in 1973–74. Though Christmann moved away from sound once back in Sydney, in 1977 he produced 'Audio-Plastik No. 4', a vinyl recording of his work *Jew's harp and traffic*, 1974. In it, the amateur melody of the jaw harp (aka Jew's harp) is counterpointed to traffic sound. 'Audio-Plastik No. 2' contains *In the stone*: a sixty-four minute sound collage of Christmann carving into the centre of a stone with hammer and chisel, with the sound then being reversed.⁸

If Christmann's sprinkle paintings, like *Oktoberwald* – painted and exhibited during his time in Berlin, while he also worked with sound – suggest visual immersion in an indeterminate field, in the context of these sound works they unavoidably signal an aural absorption. American experimental composer La Monte Young has been most directly associated with this immersive, experiential approach to isolated, non-musical sounds. *In the stone* also startlingly recalls the sound element of Robert Morris's 1961 sculpture *Box with the sound of its own making*, a wooden box containing a taped recording of its actual construction.⁹ Christmann's interests here seem strangely aligned to those of artists including Young and Morris who, influenced by John Cage's radical revision of concepts of sound and theatre, made work often labelled 'neo-dada'.¹⁰ Their works were process-oriented, concerned with the properties of materials, fundamentally to do with perception over time, and readily crossed media.

Through Jenny's long-standing interest in dada and surrealism, and Christmann's contact in 1973–74 with European, British and American artists making performances, works using sound, and equivocal objects in Berlin's contemporary art scene, Christmann may have become attuned to a dada-Cage-post-Fluxus mélange of sources with which few of his colleagues in Australia were concerned during the 1960s and 1970s.¹¹ This is the alternate



modernism that RoseLee Goldberg has described as the flipside of the once-hegemonic formalist account, a modernism based in performance modalities and vernacular forms.¹²

Seeing Christmann as an avatar of an 'alternate modernism' may, as Susan Gibb observed, help explain his currency for those younger artists engaged in a project of revisiting Australia's own art history.¹³ As Terry Smith has argued, Australian art's reception of an international modernism from the 1960s onwards occurred through received images of art that 'originated elsewhere' in cultural capitals where Australia was understood to remain at the periphery. As such, Australian artists of the 1970s and 1980s 'quickly progressed from formalist minimalism to the radical provisionality of reflexive conceptualism'.¹⁴ Their 1960s forebears, concerned with 'hard-edge' painting, as evidenced by the work around Central Street Gallery that fed into 'The Field', were not as interested in 'mixed-media cross-overs', and few paid attention to the European and American influences of dada and pop art,¹⁵ with some exceptions, such as Christmann and Richard Larter. Artists and writers now may seek to recover such alternative paths in order to devise new enabling narratives. While those familiar with Christmann's work value his inventive attentiveness to the local, his skill as a draughtsman and colourist, and his quiet dedication, the broadened exposure of Christmann's work in 2013 and 2014 may assist to resituate the longer arc of his production within Australian art's history.

Gunter Christmann, Niagara Galleries, Melbourne, 2-27 July 2013. A survey of Christmann's work will be held at Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne, July-November 2014.

- 1 Conversation with Bill Nuttall, Niagara Galleries, Melbourne, 17 January 2013.
- 2 Conversation with Mary Eagle, late December 2012.
- 3 See Elwyn Lynn, 'Gunter Christmann', *Art & Australia*, vol. 10, no. 3, January 1973, pp. 242-51; and Terry Smith, 'The painting of Gunter Christmann', *Art International*, vol. 15, no. 3, 20 March 1971, pp. 22-5; 'Color-form painting: Sydney 1967-70', *Other Voices*, vol. 1, no. 1, June-July 1970, pp. 6-17.
- 4 Christmann was included in 'The Field Now' (1984) at Heide Park and Art Gallery, Melbourne; 'Central Street' (1990) at Charles Nodrum Gallery, Melbourne; and 'Central Street Live' (2003) at Penrith Regional Gallery & the Lewers Bequest and Macquarie University Art Gallery, Sydney.
- 5 Ozkar-as-tag featured prominently in Christmann's 2002 show at Niagara Galleries, Melbourne, and in patterned 'magic carpet' arrays in 'T. O. Tranceporter' (2005) at Liverpool Street Gallery, Sydney (facilitated by Niagara). See John McPhee, 'MFCs and Gunter Christmann', *Artlink*, vol. 24, no. 3, 2004. See also Ingrid Periz, 'Gunter Christmann: The unexplained', *Australian Art Collector*, issue 41, July-September 2007, pp. 138-47.
- 6 Gunter Christmann, 'TERRA SUBPEDE (The earth underfoot)', 1980, in *Gunter Christmann: KOZMIX*, exhibition catalogue, Niagara Publishing, Melbourne, 2010, unpaginated.
- 7 Christmann's titles often feature oblique puns and word play. In the first of these two works, for example, *en face de*, French for 'facing' or 'across from', is a pun on the English 'face', which in French is *visage*.
- 8 Christmann obtained the stone from artist Makoto Fujiwara, and his framework for the sound piece, the aim to touch the 'inside' of the stone, was both 'architectural' and to do with Zen Buddhism. The actual carving process took approximately four hours. Conversation with Gunter Christmann, 25 January 2013.
- 9 See Maurice Berger, 'Duchamp and I', in *Labyrinths: Robert Morris, Minimalism, and the 1960s*, Harper & Row, New York, 1989, pp. 30-1.
- 10 See Henry Flynt, 'La Monte Young in New York, 1960-62', in William Duckworth and Richard Fleming (eds), *Sound and Light: La Monte Young, Marian Zazeela*, Associated University Presses, London, 1996; and Branden W. Joseph, *Beyond the Dream Syndicate: Tony Conrad and the Arts After Cage*, Zone, New York, 2008.
- 11 During his DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) residency in Berlin in 1973-74, Christmann came into contact with Joseph Beuys, Marcel Broodthaers, Robert Filliou, Richard Hamilton, Edward Kienholz, Mario Merz and Daniel Spoerri, among other artists. Offering one example of such work, Christmann describes witnessing an action with sound elements by Beuys; he adds that the experimental art of the early 1960s to the early-to-mid-1970s 'opened the door' for artists. Conversation with Christmann, 27 January 2013.
- 12 RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1988.
- 13 Conversation with Susan Gibb, 7 January 2013.
- 14 Terry Smith, 'Conceptual art in transit', in *Transformations in Australian Art*, vol. 2, *The Twentieth Century: Modernism and Aboriginality*, Craftsman House, Sydney, 2002, p. 138.
- 15 *ibid.*, p. 124, concerning artists' 'suspicion' of mixed media; 'The provincialism problem', 1974, *Transformations in Australian Art*, op. cit., p. 113, for a noting of Australian art's selective response to Euro-American movements.